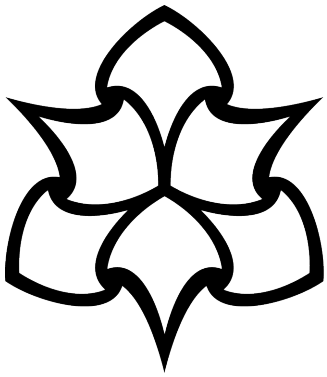

Sing It Again

Karen Solie writes about poetry in the age of climate crisis

I

In his 1965 memoir *The Road Across Canada*, Irish-born and Alberta-raised novelist Edward McCourt lamented the country's excesses: 'Too much rock, too much prairie, too much tundra, too much mountain, too much forest. Even the man who passionately believes that he shall never see a poem as lovely as a tree will be disposed to give poetry another try after he has driven the Trans-Canada Highway.' Robert Fulford, who quotes McCourt in his essay 'The Forest and Canadian Culture', also references Northrop Frye's assessment of the Group of Seven painter Tom Thomson's 'imaginative instability, the emotional unrest and dissatisfaction one feels about a country which has not been lived in'. Cited as well is Wyndham Lewis's suggestion that such a 'monstrous, empty habitat must continue to dominate this nation psychologically and culturally'. Fulford concludes, in 1992, that 'we Canadians try to study history, and try to convince ourselves that our history interests us – but geography is our real teacher, the one to which we listen with the greatest care.' Shamefully, this is true. Because Canada had been lived in, was not 'empty'. Our history is one of pretending otherwise in favour of an identity based on a geography of the colonial imagination. The brutality of this history has only recently been acknowledged. Indigenous people of many nations and territories saw their traditional lands, resources, and freedom expropriated by a government who, among other redistributions, sold parcels of land thought least arable to immigrant settlers like my grandparents.

Whether in modes of blind panic or careful political orienteering, the idea of North America as a frontier with too much of everything, whose assets must be tamed and harnessed for the good of the economy, continues to thrive. Marilynne Robinson observes how the mid-nineteenth- century's 'iron law of wages' – which decreed that the poor must be kept in a state of bare subsistence in order for the system to function – begat the austerity measures of a 'political economy' that manufactures poverty to make a few people very rich while declaring concern for the health of the middle class. This June, the Canadian federal government reapproved (long story) an expansion of the Trans Mountain Pipeline to run parallel to the existing line from Edmonton, Alberta, to Burrard Inlet, near Vancouver. Though protests by environmental and Indigenous groups are ongoing (a number of Indigenous leaders have also expressed support for the pipeline), Prime Minister Justin Trudeau promises 'shovels in the ground this summer', the creation of 'good middle-class jobs', reduced dependence on US markets, and eventual Indigenous participation in the pipeline's ownership. He assures us that all profits from Trans Mountain will be invested in clean energy futures to support the phasing-out of traditional sources. Like many, I will believe this when I see it.

Asked to write on the broad topic of climate crisis, I run up against the implicit reality that it can't be separated out from systems of economic inequality, racist violence, political

corruption, short-sighted misanthropic greed, and all the local evils they perpetrate. The accrual of evils can be difficult to accommodate. By now, you will have heard quoted many times the report by the UN Inter- governmental Panel on Climate Change, which gives us twelve years to implement unprecedented, yet still feasible, measures with which to avoid a two-degree- Celsius rise in global temperatures, and the floods, fire, heat deaths, and poverty that will inevitably ensue.

Sinking to our necks in the news cycle, the 'yet still feasible' clause dissolves in the rise, as Rob Law writes, 'of what is known as climate or ecological grief', produced by 'feelings of loss, anger, hopelessness, despair and distress caused by climate change and ecological decline'. Canadian poet and philosopher Sue Sinclair identifies with 'Westerners […] in a state of denial', including herself in 'the category of what Jonathan Rowson calls "stealth deniers" – those who "accept the reality of anthropogenic climate change" but without "the commensurate feelings, sense of responsibility or agency that one might expect" […] I'm what Rowson terms "an emotional denier"'.' Sinclair's essay embraces the onset of mourning, an active emotional response that would resist traumatic detachment from the world – though the pain, she says, is something she both wants and doesn't want.

The productive grief of mourning counters the inward sink of melancholy and denial's strategic diversions, reactions highly prized by any governing/corporate body in populations who are otherwise largely pains in its ass. 'The peasants are revolting,' as the old joke goes. Never has it been more evident that language is both cure and poison. In a CBC television interview following the Trans Mountain expansion reapproval, the embalmed presence of former Conservative MP and young-Earth creationist Stockwell Day opened a familiar escape hatch for climate change sceptics with his dismissive reference to the UN climate report as 'giving us ten years to live'. Contemptuous denial is a safe place to put what surely, for all but the most steadfastly clueless, must occasionally rustle in the undergrowth – unease at the possibility of zombie pathogens reanimated by melting permafrost, perhaps; or the prospect of a hundred-year hurricane every ten years. Also released this June, the final report by The Canadian National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls came to the 'inescapable conclusion' that in accordance with the criteria established by the UN's 1948 convention, the actions of the state against Canada's Indigenous peoples amounts to genocide. Of all the first responses one could make, Canadian Conservative Party leader Andrew Scheer saw fit to take issue with the word 'genocide', calling what's been done to them 'its own thing', which is to say, something that 'doesn't fall into that category of genocide'.

Distract and divide. Divide and conquer. Ecological grief is exacerbated by exhaustion for those whose efforts to expose the realities of their lives are consistently undermined. The exhaustion from, as Indigenous poet Billy-Ray Belcourt writes, 'the labour it takes to survive'. Journalist and filmmaker Lenny Carpenter, a member of the Attawapiskat First Nation in northern Ontario, affirms that 'It is frustrating, exhausting, and yes, emotionally draining just to read these debates, let alone engage in them. Especially as the same stories come up again and again. Controversy surrounding these issues takes an emotional toll on Indigenous people. Residential schools. Boil water advisories. Youth suicide. Lack of housing or proper schools. Missing and murdered Indigenous women. If we have not lived these experiences, we often know someone who has.'

Environmental racism and poverty create many of these experiences, the absence of clean drinking water being perhaps the most immediate. Ninety minutes from Toronto, people of the Six Nations territory are without clean water and have been for years, even as Nestlé, the world's largest commercial bottler of water, pumps 3.6 million litres each day from their land

on an expired Ontario government permit. Nestlé pays the province $503.71 for every million litres extracted. Six Nations is not compensated. Its people drive 10 kilometres to Caledonia to buy water in bottles. In a country home to 60% of the world's lakes and one-fifth of its fresh water, as of last autumn there were fifty Indigenous communities in Canada under long-term boil water advisories, some for decades.

The UN predicts that 'by 2025, 1.8 billion people will be living in countries or regions with absolute water scarcity, and two-thirds of the world's population could be living under water-stressed conditions. With the existing climate change scenario, almost half the world's population will be living in areas of high water stress by 2030.' In Ontario, despite ongoing legal action by Six Nations, Nestlé races to tie up the market. According to the Beverage Marketing Corporation, bottled water is America's most popular drink, the majority of it sold in single-serving containers. Just so you know, Nestlé – which bottles its water from springs and aquifers that may take decades to replenish – distributes under brands including Arrowhead, Poland Spring, Deer Park, Ozarka, Zephyrhills, Acqua Panna, San Pellegrino, Perrier, Vittel and Buxton.

If the connotations (and aggressive marketing) of health and purity make water eminently exploitable, so do those of its delivery system – all those innocent recyclable bottles, most of which are not recycled. An investigation published this June records 68,000 shipping containers of American plastic sent for 'handling' last year to countries which offer 'cheap labour and limited environmental regulation', including Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Laos, Senegal and Vietnam. The report quotes Vietnamese plastic sorter Nguyễn Thi Hồng Thăm: 'We're really scared of the plastic fumes, and we don't dare to drink the water from underground here.' Those who do the work have no choice, she says; 'We don't have money.' *Canadian Geographic*documents shipping containers of plastic mixed with garbage, 'including dirty diapers', arriving in Manila from Canada. 'When people think their stuff is being recycled, it clears their conscience, no matter what is actually happening beyond the blue box,' says Myra Hird, a specialist in waste management at Queen's University's School of Environmental Studies. 'Our research shows that when their conscience is clear they tend to consume more than ever. Since Canadians started recycling in earnest maybe 30 years ago, consumerism in this country has done nothing but climb.'

II

We have a Leviathan on our hands. Something like the genus *Physalia*, maybe – the man o' war. Not a true jellyfish, it's a siphonophore, a colonial organism made up of specialised individual animals called zooids or polyps physiologically integrated to the extent they cannot survive independently. In this symbiotic relationship, all the polyps work together and function as one animal whose gas-filled bladder bobs at the surface while the remainder is submerged, moving with the winds, the currents, the tides. (Wikipedia, I can't stay mad at you.)

We polyps are integrated into the organism, to individual degrees, in where we work, what we buy, how and where we travel. It's knowledge that taunts us into hopelessness, perhaps especially so if we are more-or-less comfortable and can indulge in it, shaking our fists at the gas-filled bladders floating at the tops of our societies. As Rebecca Solnit writes, 'For comfortably situated people, hopelessness means cynicism and letting oneself off the hook. If everything is doomed, then nothing is required (and vice versa).'

In the midst of all that is required, the bind poetry finds itself in, that we find ourselves in, is one of limited means. What can a poem do? Anyone who's attended literary festivals has been asked to consider what poetry is for, whether it's dead, what it even *is*. Debateable Nobel Laureate of Literature as he may be, Bob Dylan's opinion that 'Songs are songs […] I don't believe in expecting too much out of any one thing,' also applies to poems. No one would argue that poetry, or art in general, is a sufficient response to crisis, even fierce and overtly political calls to witness and to act. What is the point, then, of poems that meditate on woodpiles or trains or illness, that record romantic heartbreak or ironic encounters with signage? What good can come of Oulipo?

There are poets and readers who feel, as does Simon Armitage, that 'Big P political poetry rarely works.' Others devote themselves to an activist poetics, and some believe all poetry is inherently political. I think most of us feel all of these in some combination. Certainly, it continues to be true that, as Neruda wrote in the mid-1930s, 'in the streets the blood of the children / ran simply, like children's blood.' Daniel Borzutzky acknowledges a debt to this syntax of witness in 2018's *Lake Michigan*:

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And the hunger of an actual child is the hunger of an actual chil
d And the basic function of the economy is the basic function of
the     economy And the politically possible is the politically i
nevitable And the bourgeois savages are like bourgeois savages An
d the bourgeois savages who do not see themselves as savages  are
 like bourgeois savages who do not see themselves as savages
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While Borzutzky's lines reject the luxury of the figurative, his tacit recognition of the inadequacy of simile is itself a metaphor for the point at which imagination encounters its limit in the presence of brute fact. Questioning the efficacy, the ethics, of the poetic impulse, the poem – in its contrivance of syntax, repetition, the unit of the line – nevertheless reaffirms the urgency of the impulse and the necessity of its formal expression, of continuing to work even though the tools will always be unequal to the goal.

Poetry is not dying, nor is our sense that it is crucial. In times of crisis, personal or public, we reach for it. It has always been with us, as have our fears for its relevance. (Cyclical arguments as to the irrelevance of certain subjects or approaches deemed 'not poetry' or simply 'over' appear to be truly immortal.) We distrust poetry because it can't do what we want it to, what we need it to, yet we persist. It's our persistence as writers and as readers, in light of what poetry cannot do, that holds the key to what it can. To trot out everyone's favourite philosophical distinction, though poetry isn't sufficient, it may be necessary.

Whereas Solnit observes that 'Despair is often premature […] a form of impatience as well as certainty,' poetry is a practice of patience and uncertainty. Its imperative is to clearly articulate encounters with the unclear, the unresolved, the indefinable. It is to write again that which is written over or ignored by powers whose interests lie elsewhere. It is to affirm presence. This is an excerpt from Anishinaabe artist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's 'I Am Graffiti':

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she painted three white Xs on the wall of the grocery store.  one
. two. three. then they were erased. except, i am graffiti. excep
t, mistakes were made.  the Xs were made out of milk  because the
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y took our food. one. two. three. then we were erased. except, i
 am graffiti. except, mistakes were made.

Patience and uncertainty are not passive. They are, like age, not for sissies, requiring us to choose repeatedly, to reject the cynicism that off-gases stagnant silence and inaction. Such cynicism is, as Robinson writes, ‘the great enabler of corruption, normalizing and universalizing it so that any particular instance of wrongdoing can be left to fester or metastasize as the world wags’. Poetry refuses to remain silent about systemic violences and neglect. But poems also console, entertain, celebrate, and play. All poetry, writes Quebecois poet and novelist Nicole Brossard, ‘is a radical reminder of that flying being in us which most of the time is called back to reality and survival’, that tries ‘to figure out the enigma of being alive’. The aspects of the self that offer respite from the realities of survival also affirm that attending to these realities is worthwhile.

Great poems have undeniable power. Neruda’s lines reverberate with the implications of their image, and of their poetics. When Alice Oswald’s ‘Swan’ diverges from its astonishing imagistic devotions to the dead creature and heads off across a field of allegory, imploring itself to

say something to the frozen cloud of the head before it thaws
whose one dead eye is a growing cone of twilight in the middle o
f winter it is snowing there and the bride has just set out to
walk to her wedding but how can she reach the little black-lit
church it is so cold the bells like iron angels hung from one
note keep ringing and ringing

– I feel my mind setting out across that expanse, accompanied by the poem, feel physically the poem’s divergence, its deepening. It’s a moment that happens to me, confirms a felt integrity of emotion, intellect, and the physical; one that confirms (if you will) the enigma. It’s an experience doubled in a charge of transformation both solitary and, as communicated, shared. After experiencing a great poem, things often look a little different. And change, however small, affirms the capacity for change.

Not all poems are great. In fact, precious few are great. But all, if practiced seriously, with attention, refuse to settle. A recent newsletter from Underground Writing, a literature-based creative writing program serving migrant, incarcerated, and other at-risk communities in northern Washington, includes an essay by the writer-teacher A Muia, who shares this fragment written by a student in juvenile detention: ‘I been having a hard time because I’m starting to like it here and I don’t want to get used to being locked up.’ Literary prizes and the book as product, festivals, degrees, online presence – and, yes, even great poems – are not the sum of poetry.

Nor are we the sum of our consumer habits, of our worth as assigned within the political economy. Such ‘banal and vapid, assessments of what we are […] threaten us’, writes Robinson, and ‘dull us to our circumstance’, just as they dull us to the circumstances of others. Whether we identify with it or not, agree, disagree, are irritated or delighted, love it or hate it or experience it in some complex unwieldy combination, art puts us into practice. Its creation and reception stubbornly insist that life, and lives, are worth attention. As David Means notes, ‘one is under no obligation’ to read and work through anything. ‘The compassionate reader moves ahead.’ ‘We never stop learning to read,’ he says, and we

never stop learning to write. From this position, poetry addresses the future in all the improbable ways it can think of, all the ways it's told it would be wiser, or easier, to avoid. Whether discovering the pockets of complacency in our own imaginations, experiencing through others' poems the expansion of our emotional and cognitive capacities, or even responding to what we believe are poems' failures of imagination, we are alive to potential. 'An Old Story', the final poem from Tracy K Smith's *Wade in the Water,* builds to a vision of hope:

> A long age Passed. When at least
> we knew how little Would survive us – how little we had mended
> Or built that was not now lost – something Large and old awoke.
> And then our singing Brought on a different manner of weather.
> Then animals long believed gone crept down From trees. We took n
> ew stock of one another. We wept to be reminded of such color.

No, a song can't do everything. But, as Robinson writes, 'We are being starved of the truth, and should miss no chance to tell it when we can.' If poems are worth memorising, repeating, rereading, so are the reasons we return to them. Of course we need to act outside poetry. That this should go without saying doesn't mean we don't have to keep saying it. *And*, if we have songs to sing, we should sing them now.

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